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SUBJECT: Beywatch: Are You Really American?
Tunisians Want to Know!

¶1. The following is one of a series of reporting cables drafted by Post's entry level officers, which have the "Beywatch" caption. We believe the perspectives offered in the following vignette will give the reader a look into everyday life in Tunisia that may not be central to more formal reporting. For more information about Tunisia or the Embassy Tunis Entry Level Officer Development initiative, see our Siprnet website:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>.

¶2. A recent trip to Djerba, an island off the coast of Tunisia, revealed a funny thing about tourists: it's not just Americans who travel the globe to find what they left at home. Conoff and CAO took a last minute four-day trip to this tourist destination island at the height of the summer season. Arriving at the SprinClub hotel on a Sunday morning, they were enthusiastically greeted in Italian. Taken aback, but ever ready to adapt to the situation at hand, Conoff reached into the back of her brain and responded in Italian. One look at the proffered diplomatic identification cards and the staff quickly turned to English, but they were the first of many incredulous interlocutors to express surprise that their guests were Americans.

¶3. For Tunisia, "Tourism is by far the largest services sector contributor," claims an on-line report of Oxford Business Group. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) report on Tunisia for 2006 estimates that "T&T Economy employment is 510,000 jobs in 2006, 17.0 percent of total employment, or 1 in every 5.9 jobs." It estimates an increase by 2016 to 618,000 jobs, or one in every 5.8 jobs." It also notes that "the 271,000 T&T Industry jobs account for 9.0 percent of total employment in 2006 and are forecast to total 337,000 jobs or 9.4 percent of the total by 2016." And it estimates the amount of tourism-generated economic activity at about \$6.5 billion for 2006. Tunisian tourism, however, has not typically reached out to Americans. According to the U.S. Country Commercial Guide on Tunisia, in 2005 only 15,700 of the 6.3 million tourists traveling to Tunisia were American. The overall total included more than a million each of French, and Libyan tourists, almost a million Algerians, and more than half a million Germans, so it's no surprise that there was a dearth of American tourists in Djerba. However, the reaction to Emboffs' presence was truly surprising in its depth of astonishment. The imported Italian staff largely ignored them, but word that Americans were about in this Italian hotel (even the restrooms were indicated with signs in Italian!) spread like wildfire, and soon the entire Djerbian staff addressed them with a "hello" or "good morning." They were marked.

¶4. The same conversation repeated itself wherever Emboffs went. They would address someone in French and the person would immediately want to know if they were French. No? Swiss? Belgian? Czech? Polish? Well, what then? The response "American" would immediately elicit an incredulous look and another question: "Des vraies américaines?"-"Real Americans?" From what origin, they would want to know. The most amusing interaction was with a hotel retail store owner who told Emboffs they were the first Americans he had ever met! The same conversation was repeated again and again in the souk, in taxis, in the airport, and in restaurants. Though incredulous, the Djerbians appeared to be genuinely pleased to meet Americans.

¶5. Reports like "Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy," published in September 2005, make it clear that interpersonal interaction is key to mutual understanding. Tourism can play an important, albeit uncontrolled, role in this endeavor. While an increase in American visitors would certainly help Tunisian tourism in general, it could also serve as a conduit for intercultural dialogue that is much needed in this part of the world. In the meantime, Embassy staff will do its part exploring nooks and crannies off the beaten American tourist path to show our faces, make connections, and expose Tunisians to "les vrais américains."

BALLARD